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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings of a study examining the appreciation of editorial cartoons as a function of personal characteristics rather than group membership. The variables examined were self-consciousness and the ability to utilize humor as a coping mechanism. Appreciation of editorial cartoons during the 1992 presidential campaign was measured among college students. It was expected that self-consciousness would be related to the appreciation of editorial cartoons reflecting on the candidates and campaign themes. High self-consciousness was expected to be related to endorsement of ideas easily defensible in the college population. The capacity to utilize humor as a coping strategy was expected to be related positively to overall appreciation of editorial cartoons. The participants were 80 volunteers from introductory psychology classes at a midwestern university. The subjects completed an initial stage of assessment when they completed a survey containing the self-consciousness scale and the coping humor scale. Then the subjects rated a series of cartoons for level of funniness on a 7-point scale. Analysis of the appreciation scores showed that a significant main effect for self-consciousness was obtained. Considering the coping with humor scores, high scorers showed greater humor appreciation than low scorers. This finding supports the expectation that persons disposed to the utilization of humor in coping situations would appreciate editorial cartoons to a greater extent than low scorers on this dimension. Results appeared to reflect a tendency among high self-consciousness individuals to show views perceived as acceptable on the college campus during the 1992 presidential campaign. Contains 16 references. (DK)

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Appreciation of Presidential Editorial Cartoons In Relation to Self-Consciousness

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Appreciation of Presidential Editorial Cartoons In Relation to Self-Consciousness

Abstract

The editorial cartoon has a long history in the election process. Reference group membership has been viewed as the major factor influencing appreciation of editorial cartoons during a presidential campaign. This study examined the variables of self-consciousness and coping with humor in relation to appreciation of editorial cartoons critical of the presidential candidates during the 1992 campaign. Both self-consciousness levels and one's capacity to cope with humor significantly affected appreciation of editorial cartoons with political themes.

Appreciation of Presidential Editorial Cartoons

in Relation to Self-Consciousness

Each presidential election year the editorial cartoonists present a barrage of images concerning the candidates to the general public. Schultz (1977) concluded that the intensity of personal beliefs found in editorial cartoons cannot be matched in other humor forms. Duden (1985) discussed how the cartoon is an avenue for the expression of hostility toward a particular candidate or political ideology. Dennis (1975) examined the increasing hostility and complexity of editorial cartoons as a presidential campaign progresses toward election day. Few studies have examined the appreciation of editorial cartoons, and have focused on a reference group theory to explain their appeal to an individual (Priest, 1966; Priest & Abrahams, 1970).

The purpose of this study was to examine the appreciation of editorial cartoons as a function of personal characteristics rather than group membership. The variables examined were self-consciousness (Fenigstein, 1979), and the ability to utilize humor as a coping mechanism. A number of investigations have shown that the trait of self-consciousness shapes the behavior of people and their cognitions. One's level of self-consciousness has been found to influence the accuracy of self-descriptions (Turner, 1978), predictions of personal aggressive behavior (Scheier, 1976), the truthfulness of public opinions (Scheier, 1980), and self-disclosure (Franzoi & Davis, 1985). Scheier (1980) has shown that high public self-consciousness can lead to assuming moderate political opinions.

Previous research has documented that pictorial humor effectively manipulates affect (Baron, 1978; Chapman, 1983; Prerost, 1983). Many people develop the capacity to utilize humor as a coping strategy to moderate the negative effects of stress (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983), and to diminish unpleasant states of anger (Prerost, 1987). Some researchers have suggested that voting behavior is the result of emotional responses to the candidates rather than consideration of issue statements (Kinder, 1978).

Considering these factors, appreciation of editorial cartoons during the 1992 presidential campaign was measured among college students. It was expected that self-consciousness would be related to the appreciation of editorial cartoons reflecting on the candidates and campaign themes. High self-consciousness was expected to be related

to endorsement of ideas easily defensible in the college population. Further, the capacity to utilize humor as a coping strategy was expected to be positively related to overall appreciation of editorial cartoons.

Method

Subjects

The participants were 80 (40 male, 40 female) volunteers from Introductory Psychology classes at a midwestern university. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years.

Procedure

The subjects completed an initial stage of assessment when they completed a survey containing the Self-Consciousness Scale, and the Coping Humor Scale. A median-split was used to differentiate subjects as high or low on both self-consciousness and humor coping.

Then the subjects rated a series of cartoons for level of funniness on a seven-point scale with "0" Not at all funny to "6" Extremely funny. The cartoons had five types of content: 1) anti-Bush; 2) anti-Clinton; 3) anti-Perot; 4) anti-political process; and 5) non-political. The editorial cartoons with the candidates' images and political content were a selection published by nationally known syndicated cartoonists. The non-political cartoons were single-pane depictions found in daily newspapers. The selection of cartoons was randomly ordered in booklet form for the subjects to rate on the funniness dimension.

Results and Conclusions

Analysis of the appreciation scores showed that a significant main effect for self-consciousness was obtained ($p<.01$). The high self-consciousness scorers rated the anti-Bush cartoons as significantly funnier than the low scorers. This was also found for the anti-Perot, and anti-political process cartoons ($p<.01$). But no significance was found for appreciation ratings between high and low scorers for the anti-Clinton and non-political cartoons. The same pattern was found for males and females, but the latter showed higher overall humor appreciation scores than males.

Considering the coping with Humor scores, high scorers showed greater humor appreciation than low scorers for all types of cartoons ($p<.01$). This finding supports the expectation that persons disposed to the utilization of humor in coping situations would appreciate editorial cartoons to a greater extent than low scorers on this dimension. Thus, editorial cartoons appear to be seen as a form of humor and can evoke a humor response.

Self-consciousness was related to appreciation of those cartoons critical of Bush, Perot, and the political process. High scorers reported significantly more enjoyment of those editorial cartoons than low scorers. This may reflect a tendency among high self-consciousness individuals to show views perceived as acceptable on the college campus during the 1992 presidential campaign. The trait of self-consciousness appears to be an important factor in the appreciation of editorial cartoons during an election year. Thus, appreciation of this humorous material is influenced by personal factors beyond reference group membership.

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